

The Hutt's Tournament pt. 3

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Chapter 3: Demise

"Next time kill someone smaller," she grunted as we heaved the limp body.

"He's not dead. We just need to put him somewhere out of the way," I pulled on the large arms. Thankfully we could drag him along the dirt floor easy enough. His physiology was thankfully disguised by his brutish appearance. Romassians are surprisingly lighter than their mass would lead you to believe. Hollow bones and light weight muscle structure helped immensely. But make no mistake; he was heavy. People walking by exchanged curious looks but no one said a word. A Gamorrean approached, viboraxe in hand.

"What's wrong?" he snorted. His head cocked to one side. Thankfully these guards were as stupid as they were ugly.

"He's drunk. We need to get him to the motor pool. Shuttle him back to town, give us a hand" Pandora spoke quickly and confidently. A better liar than myself. With a grunt the guard took the legs. Pandora and I each grabbed an arm. It didn't take long to get him down to the garage full of skiffs and swoops. Jabba's massive sail barge was docked here as well.

"What are we bringing him down here for again?" I asked. Actually she never told me in the first place. I was surprised at her strength. She hadn't struggled or complained at all. She was what some might call "a real trooper".

"We're putting him on a skiff and sending him out. By the time he

wakes up and finds his way back, the tournament will be long over." She whispered. The tusked face guard never hesitated or asked another question. He just did what we asked.

Barada, the dog faced mechanic, wandered over to us. He looked suspiciously at our prisoner.

"What's going on, here?" he growled insensitively. Pandora snapped him a glance. He seemed to take a step back nervously.

"Get us a skiff, and hurry. Jabba wouldn't like us to be late." We put the Romassian down and Pandora hurried off.

"I'll find some supplies. Some water or rations." She disappeared around a group of speeders, her black hair swaying lightly. Damn. She was a beauty. And now I was standing here in Jabba's motor pool with a Gamorrean and a dog faced brute trying to hide the body of a huge Romassian. Life deals you weird hands.

A few minutes later Barada glided a run down skiff near our unconscious friend. It took three tries to get him up and into the vehicle. The greasy Gamorrean dropping Salko on his head once, causing all of us to wince. It looked like it would have hurt. If he had been awake to feel it.

"What are you gonna do with him?" Barada asked. I took a second to think about it. I wasn't sure why Pandora thought of this but it seemed as a good an idea as any.

"He was caught trying to fix some of the Sabacc decks. So we're gonna drop out in the middle of the dune sea. Deserves a lot worse if you ask me." I tried to stay in character. It was something Golan would have said I'm sure. But then again, his taste in women surprised me.

Barada nodded in agreement. Seemed like a fair decision to him.

"Where the hell is she?" I asked aloud. She had been gone for about fifteen minutes. I looked amongst the old skiffs and swoops. Nothing. I was getting nervous. If someone walked in I was a goner. We waited another ten minutes and Pandora came back. She had two skins of water slung over each shoulder and carried a canister of rations. She tossed the cache in the skiff and started punching in coordinates into the speeder. With a low rumble the large doors opened letting in the cool night air. The stars were bright and a red moon glowed, reminding me of Pandora's eyes. With a few manual steering adjustments she aimed the skiff toward the open sea of sand and jumped to the ground.

I signaled for the doors to close and Pandora walked inside as the skiff sailed out of sight. I slipped Barada and the guard some credits to keep their mouths shut as I watched the large doors close and turned to Pandora. She was studying the large sail barge closely. Her eyes locked.

"Thanks Pandora. I appreciate the help." She looked back at me preoccupied as we walked out of the motor pool. A smile crossed her lips and she took my hand.

"You are certainly welcome." She put her hands on my chest and then released the magnetic seal to my helmet. Cautiously she slid the helmet off and ran her hand through my hair.

"This is kinda sudden don't you think?" I quipped lightly as I pulled her close and kissed her neck.

"I usually don't work this fast," she panted shallowly. Her lips met mine and we kissed deeply. I pulled back and smiled.

"I should hide bodies more often." She smiled and put her fingers on my lips.

"Don't you ever shut up?" We kissed again in that dark hallway.

My luck was turning.

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Jabba's palace, despite the dregs that now inhabit it, was once a place of splendor. Having all the amenities anyone could hope for, the vast rooms could host any number of events. The main dining area, no longer used for that purpose since Jabba regularly insisted everyone eat and sleep in his throne room so he could watch them, was normally vacant. But for this special occasion it was decorated with Sabacc tables and servers. Twenty large circular tables dotted the room each with a dealer droid sitting quietly, waiting. A large holovid screen was set at the far end of the room with each players table assignment.

I wandered through the host of tables to look for my assignment. A crowd had already gathered in front of it. Some of the players seemed happy or indifferent at their arrangement. Other's sunk their heads, defeated already. I found Golan's name and studied the other names. The Devorian Labria was at my table. He wasn't too bad. But I've beaten him enough times to know he wasn't a threat. Two names I was vaguely familiar with and the Jawa Loonta were also with me. I slowly looked around at the people flowing in. I cracked my knuckles and found my table. Lucky 13.

The dealer was a run down L-11 droid, built into the table. He was just a chest and head. His metallic arms manipulated the cards with ease. His internal components were linked with Jabba's main computer and monitored by three judges. I could tell this might actually be a fair contest since the three judges, Bib Fortuna, the bulky Chevin Ephont Mon and the goat-faced Gran Ree-Yees all hated each other. The three couldn't possibly work together on anything.

I nodded to the droid as the smelly Loonta sat next to me. I switched on my helmet's filter and still the little vermin's stench managed to seep in. I could only imagine how it was for my fellow players as the devil looking Labria sat down. His red skin imitated my stolen armor and his horns curved in opposite directions.

Labria was Tatooine's most recognized spy. Not a trait a spy wants, yet everyone knows to keep your mouth shut around him. His jagged teeth were yellow as he smiled at me. His glazed eyes told me he had already started drinking this morning. Yet somehow he played better drunk. A strange being to play with. He'd lure your confidence in by thinking he was not sober enough to think straight, then he'd clean

house. But I hadn't lost to him in years. I wasn't worried.

I was joined by two more humans, a smuggler named Antol and the Corellian gambler Drack. Drack was a pro. He made his living hustling games across the galaxy

My seat jolted as a person behind me bumped his chair into mine. I turned quickly to see Solo sit down. I smiled a hidden grin under the helmet. I could at least keep an eye on the competition now. And I wasn't talking about a card game.

I'm one of the few smugglers who believe in the Force. I've seen a Jedi work his magic and I've seen evil men do unbelievable things. But the Force never affected my life at all. But I started thinking maybe something beyond me was in control when Pandora sat at the table across from both Solo and myself. This was too weird to be coincidence.

"Morning handsome," she said with a smile as she sat.

"Morning," Solo and I said in unison. We turned to see each other. Solo glared at me like he was looking through my helmet into my soul.

"The lady was talking to me chrome dome," Solo chided as he turned back to the table. I let out a muffled laugh. He cocked his head angrily.

"Really? I didn't think a woman as lovely as her associated with riff-raff like you. Kinda beneath her don't you think?" It was my turn to return my gaze to the table.

"At least I don't hide behind a mask," his voice thick with sarcasm.

"We'd wish you would, your making the Jawas queasy." Just then Jabba's sled eased into the room near the holovid screen. His clanky interpreter droid, freshly slimed, waddled behind. Apparently he translated something the fat slug didn't like. Jabba was prone to fits of anger.

"Can I have your attention please?" The crowd settled immediately and focused on the droid. "Gentlebeings take your assigned seat and we will begin shortly." The droid's prissy voice seemed to be drowned in the crowd. Soon enough the small talk quieted and Jabba spoke.

"You are the best players in the galaxy. Some of you have worked for me, some for competitors. Today, you have no history with me. You are here to win and nothing else. I promise a fair game and a good time."

"That'll be a first," Solo chuckled. "That slug doesn't have a fair bone in that pudgy little body of his." Pandora covered a laugh.

"By the end of the day there will be twenty players left. The losers can remain in the palace for as long as you wish. But my law is absolute. To offend another player is to offend me. To cheat, is to cheat me. Cheaters will face severe punishment," the droid followed the Hutt's booming lead. Several players stirred nervously. Severe

punishment from Jabba made Imperial interrogation seem like a nap.

" You play until you either are out of money or have the entire pot. Anyone wishing to forfeit, must add their chips to the Sabacc pot. You will leave here empty handed or with all the money. There will be no quitting while you're ahead."

"Seems simple enough," I looked at the Devorian as he scowled his ugly scowl.

"Drinks and food will be served. Feel free to enjoy anything you wish. And let the best being win." Another round of applause shuddered through the grand dining room. I shifted in my seat absently and the droid passed out the cards. **What I'd do for a cigar right now.**

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I watched the card's face pulse and change. It flashed suits and numbers at a blinding rate.

"Call," said L-11 and the faces on the card stopped. My card was The Star. **How fitting**, I thought. The card was worth minus seventeen. Labria had The Queen of Air and Darkness worth minus two. Loonta had the Mistress of Flasks. Thirteen. Antol showed minus five and Drack laid down a five of coins. My deal.

I collected the cards and the computer shuffled them. As soon as everyone anted up, throwing several credits into the Sabacc pot. I dealt everyone two cards, slowly watching their reactions. Nothing. Everyone seemed cool. I myself had a four of staves and a one of sabers. Five wasn't going to help me. Labria tossed a credit in the pot and folded. Loonta wanted to play as did Drack. Antol folded quietly and I decided to go ahead and do what I came here for. I tossed in a credit, hoping for a shift.

"Shift," the dealer called and I could see one of my cards was lucky enough to change. I figured there was a fifty-fifty shot at a shift so why not? The images on the card shifted in a blur and suddenly fixed itself on the Mistress of Coins. I had a total of seventeen. Not much to work with. After a few rounds of raising the bets, Loonta called.

I slapped down my cards, " Seventeen."

Loonta swore in Jawa. He had Fifteen. Drack smiled wildly.

"Twenty-two. Read'em and weep." He collected the hand pot and continued to smile.

This continued for several more hours. With the quality of the players it was hard for anyone to take a solid lead. But Drack and I seemed to have a pretty good handle on the situation and it looked like we'd have a showdown as soon as we dumped these other guys.

I wanted to drink but couldn't blow my cover by removing my helmet. I was thirsty and dying for a cigar. My concentration was slipping slowly.

From time to time players at other tables would stand up and walk dejectedly out of the room. One sobbed slightly as he shuffled away. 2,000 credits were a lot to lose. Not something you can drop accidentally down a sewer drain.

Solo, it seemed from incessant gloating, was cleaning up. He joked and made small talk as he collected more and more credits. Pandora wasn't doing to badly either. By the pile of chips she had surrounding her, she seemed to be doing pretty well.

"Nineteen." I had won another round. This time Loonta was finished. He gathered himself and quietly walked away. "Tough luck, buddy." I tried to sound sincere. And I was. The smelly little devil, the only Jawa contestant, wasn't a bad player. But he was clearly overmatched. When he was finally out of the room, the table gave out a collected sigh.

"Man, those Jawas smell. Good work Golan." Drack said breathing deeply for the first time today. I shrugged.

"Wear a helmet. Filters out the stink. I can't even tell Solo's playing behind me without looking." I chuckled. A few scattered laughs from surrounding tables followed.

"I'd watch what you're saying," Solo warned, " I might cover ya in Chollka berries and let that girlfriend of yours eat ya." This was followed by some ooh's and laughs as well. Golan's reputation for large ladies was widely known.

"Well we all know why they call you Solo, now don't we?" I looked at my cards as I let that one settle in. Twenty-one. What do you know? I placed a few credits in the pot and upped the ante.

"Well I am the best looking date anyone could ask for," the room roared with laughter and I had to admit, he could take a barb with the best of them. I took a chip from my stash and tossed it in front of Solo.

"TouchÃ©." He tossed it back and smiled his crooked smile.

"I'll get it soon enough, Golan." He looked at me oddly. For a second I thought I might have blown my cover. He could sense I wasn't Golan. But he returned to his game as I won mine. This time the pot was pretty good and Antol had let it all ride. He rode that last hand all the way out of the tournament.

He sat there with his hands in his face for a moment, Drack patting him on the back.

"You done good, pirate. Good luck to ya." Antol leaned back and sighed deeply. Putting his hands on the table he pushed back his chair and stood.

"Good luck guys, I mean it." His eyes held back tears and his lower lip trembled. I felt bad for him. So many of these players had so much riding on this game. While everyone here was a great player, few could make a living at it. Some, like Antol, spent their entire savings just to get here, hoping to win it big. Others, like Solo and myself, were here to prove they were the best. I could afford to lose. I pitied the ones who couldn't.

Another hour went by. I had managed to take most of Labria's money and made a minor dent in Drack's. Suddenly Drack started winning. And he was winning big. He even had a rare Idiot's Array. I started to get flustered. I wasn't thirsty any more but I was craving a cigar like crazy. I closed my eyes to get my act together.

Concentrate Garic. Come on, concentrate._._ I still kept losing and Labia was almost done, a few chips left in a scarce pile. Something wasn't quite right. That's when I started noticing the black gloves Drack wore and how his hands moved. He'd always rub his left thumb with his index finger after each shift. Not idly, like a habit, more like procedure one takes when working. I stared at the glove and used the vision enhancement to see an impression on the tip of the thumb. It was a circle about four centimeters across and just a sliver of thickness. But like a pair of old pants that wore on the seat, I could see the small disk in his thumb. A skifter chip.

A skifter chip interfered with the electronic pulses, taking the randomness factor away. With a press it would stabilize the changing card to something more to your liking.

I stared at Drack for a moment. If I blew the whistle on him he was a dead man. But if I let him continue, I could lose. And I didn't want either to happen. I needed a way to disable that chip. He won again. Damn

"You boys are making it easy," he gloated. Labria sneered as I shook my head slowly. I looked at the head's up display at some of the options Golan had installed. There was a comm jammer. Flooding the airwaves with static. But that was to risky. I could end up jamming the main console disrupting everyone's game. His gloves had muscle enhancers. I might be able to destroy it if I could grab his hand.

"Sabacc!" Drack cried. He'd won again. And collected a large Sabacc pot to boot. This had to come to a stop. Then in the corner of my eye I saw what I needed. I laughed out loud and patted Drack on the shoulder.

"You're getting good at this boy." I offered my left hand. A congratulatory handshake. He looked nervously for a moment and then decided it was okay. He grabbed my hand firmly and was greeted with a huge shock of electricity hit him. He jumped back howling as the room erupted in laughter.

Angry he pulled out a hidden blaster and I managed to swat it aside with my hand. The crowd mumbled at the commotion, turning to see. Grabbing his collar I pulled him close and whispered into his ear.

"Skifter. Now sit down and shut up or you'll get us both killed." Like a spilled drink, the blood in Drack's face drained. He looked at The dealer and then tried to collect himself. He sat slowly and nodded, sweat dripping from his forehead. He rubbed his hand and looked at his cards.

"One more outburst and you're both gone." The droid said nervously. The pressure Jabba had on his dealers was immense and this poor robot didn't want any trouble at his table.

"Sorry, just got sick of his bragging. Tell him to shut up and play." I tried to sound mean, but it sounded more like a whine.

"Having problems?" Solo asked happily.

"Yeah. You're lips keep flapping but you don't have anything to say," I snapped back. I picked up my cards and continued playing. Drack seemed a little queasy for the rest of the game. But he smiled at me briefly. I had saved his hide and he knew it.

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"A cheat," was all he said. The guards grappled onto the Quarren at Solo's table as quick as lightening. His name was Velten and a known cheat. He had a skifter chip as well, only not nearly as well hidden as Drack. A howl for blood came from a player and the room followed his lead. The squidfaced creature was taken before Jabba, thrown to the ground at Jabba's dais. He knelt there, trembling in fear.

Jabba, his eyes wide with insult, consulted briefly with Bib Fortuna. The Twi'lek's head tail twitched gingerly with each whisper. The quarren started sobbing uncontrollably.

"For having the insolence to enter his Excellency's Palace and defiling the Mighty Jabba's prestigious tournament," the droid interpreted the Hutt's deep throated rumble "you are hereby sentenced to death. But realize how merciful the All Mighty Jabba is by sparing you the Great Pit of Carkoon." Jabba waved a Weequay guard over to the whimpering man. The crowd surged forward as the guard pulled a blaster and aimed it to his head. "Instead, you have been sentenced to immediate execution. If you wish to beg for mercy, the great Jabba the Hutt will now hear your plea."

Velten tried to stand but the blaster to his head gave him second thoughts. Clasping his hands together, he begged for his pitiful life.

"Please. I'm a desperate man. I needed to win," he sobbed. "I'm deep in debt, I didn't know what to do. Please reconsider. I'll do anything..."

Ho-ho-ho. That trademark laugh rolled out. A large wookiee stepped in my view and I heard a blaster go off and a cheer echo through the palace. As the crowd dispersed, the limp body of Velten was dragged out of the room, an example of Jabba's authority. A flash of panic washed over me. **If he was invited and they killed him, what would they do to me?**

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Labria sat and drank his ale absently. Drack swallowed restlessly, thankful it wasn't him. After awhile Drack, now without his precious chip, lost. He stood somberly and looked me in face.

"Thanks." I nodded and he walked away. Kid learned a lesson that was

worth more than anything in the world. Don't cross Jabba. He just might make it after all.

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I could see hope spark in Labria's eyes. If he could win the pot it would postpone his departure from the game. He really had no chance. He had won enough to stay in the game. Always close but never making any ground. Hope can be cruel sometimes.

I dealt the cards. Labria's face was stoic, giving me no clue to his hand. I looked at my own. Demise and seven of coins. Minus six wasn't going to cut it. I discarded the seven only to get its brother, the seven of flasks. I drew another card as did my horned opponent. A huge grin filled my face. I couldn't control myself. I bet just enough to make Labria use up the rest of his chips. This was the last hand as I called him. He laid his cards on the table. Endurance and Moderation. A good combination to live your life by and not bad for Sabacc. Minus twenty-two. He smiled a jagged smirk, yellow pointed teeth showing.

I placed my cards one by one. Demise and seven of flasks. For minus six. I laid down my last card worth negative seventeen.

"Sabacc." I collected both pots, now possessing all the money at the table. Labria's grinned melted as he stared at the last card.

The Star.

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I waited outside the game room for Pandora. She was battling it out with an Ithorian and a Quarren. Solo had managed to win his table as did his pal Calrissian. They were in the hallway with me talking about some scheme or another. The wookiee Chewbacca had joined them. A few other winners congregated in the hall waiting to see who their next group of adversaries would be. I kept thinking back to Drack.

I pushed any negative thoughts to the back of my mind as Pandora walked into the corridor. She looked somber and sullen. I approached her only to be met by Solo who had broken off from his conversation to talk to her as well. He sneered at me and I rolled my eyes.

"So? How'd it go?" he asked. She brushed the hair from her face and frowned. Even upset she looked beautiful. Her eyes were dim, their usual glow subdued. Her hand planted on her hips and she sighed.

"I won..." a smile erupted on her face as she hugged Solo. She screamed in exhilaration. I took a step back. Looked like Solo was the real winner. My heart sank. Thankfully my helmet covered my disappointment. I took a step back as she released Solo from their embrace. With another shriek of joy she lurched at me and gave me a tight hug as well.

Now it was Solo's turn to be confused. She showed me just as much enthusiasm as she had Solo. Neither one of us knew how to take it. I simply returned her embrace with a squeeze of my own. She kissed my helmet quickly as she let go.

"Looks like you guys aren't out of the woods yet," she chided. Lando

had weaseled his way over to us and gently took her hand and kissed it. A confused look appeared on Pandora and I chuckled.

"Congratulations, beautiful mistress. It's rare to find a woman with such beauty and savvy who also has the intelligence and fortitude to play Sabacc." Lando dripped with insincerity. Pandora snatched her hand away and wiped it on her pant leg like it has been coated with a sick fluid.

"You'll find woman aren't the baby producing, thoughtless pieces of meat that you think of them, you arrogant chauvinist," she snapped insulted. Both Solo and I muffled a laugh while the wookiee chuckled in the background. Lando's face turned an ashen color and seemed to look down right uncomfortable. "He's a friend of yours?" she asked Solo disgusted.

"Me?" he smirked. "No. I hardly know him."

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I seemed to stare at her for a lifetime. She was a truly beautiful woman. I hardly noticed the guards surround us as we chatted around a server droid that offered drinks. Pandora was the first one to look confused. Her brow furrowed as they drew near. There were three Gamorreans around us. One swung his force pike at my knees unexpectedly. My legs buckled as I hit the ground on my knees. Pandora screamed as they pounced on me.

One grabbed my arms as I was still dazed from the initial attack. Another punched me in my armored chest. Getting hit in the chest by a Gamorrean is a unique experience. Usually you don't live to talk about it. The wind rushed out of me like a blaster bolt. Thankfully the armor took most of the blow. I gasped horribly for breath. My head spun and multicolored spots appeared as blackness ebbed and flowed into my vision. I could hear Pandora try to get in the middle of it all, but Solo held her back.

The Gamorrean holding me, straightened me up to get a better grip. Chewbacca stepped in and the guards thought twice about striking me a second time. It was pretty clear they had me. No need for overkill. I made a mental note. If I live through this buy the wookiee something nice. Maybe a brush or a comb.

I can say one thing, I wasn't treated like the fragile creature I am as they brought me before Jabba. My head hung low as I tried to remain conscious. I felt queasy and my head pounded mercilessly. I jerked my head up occasionally to attempt to get my bearings. All it did was make me woozier than I already was.

"His Excellency demands to know how long you thought this masquerade would last? Do you take him for a fool?" The interpreter prattled on about insulting and dishonoring Jabba. I could hardly keep awake. Every moment a struggle to remain sensible. A fat hand grabbed my helmet and twisted it off viciously.

"You stupid son of a..." Han started surprised. A few gasps filtered through the room. The air seemed to revitalize me a little and my vision cleared. I was able to keep my head up and look at the Hutt's wide face. Stand next to him was Bib Fortuna and Boba Fett. Stepping

into view was the large Salko, he sneered my way. And then the scarred familiar face appeared inched from mine. His breath was still bad and his face still ugly.

"I told you you were a dead man," he spat in my face. I managed a weak but dignified response.

"You're still and always will be a loser, Golan."

End
file.